

# FEAST

FALL 2008



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# FEAST

— FALL 2008 —



The warmth within



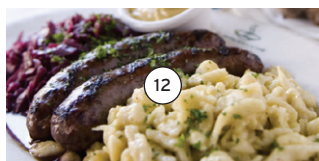
9 breakfasts to go



5 halal heavens



5 Jewish joints



5 German delights



The *fixe* is in



5 cooking classes



6 bloody sausages



8 great game-day bars



6 Seoul foods



6 perfect cheese plates



Mapo tofu ramen: a love story

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## ZAZIE



# The warmth within

It may still feel like summer, but winter's gonna come — fast. And you know what? I can't wait. I love sweaters and scarves. I love cold air and hot drinks. I love bundling up, getting introverted, staying in. Little white lights, the smell of fireplaces (or old heaters), woolly hats. And I can't wait for winter cuisine. When the weather outside is frightful, I want my dinner to be delightful — and by that I mean hearty, flavorful, and fabulous. More than in warmer months, when being outside is the main attraction and food is what keeps you going from party to party and picnic to picnic, winter is the time when food's the main attraction. This installment of FEAST is an homage to the cold that's coming and the culinary ways we can celebrate it. Jewish and German cuisines both come from the land of perpetual winter. The heat of Korean BBQ, mapo tofu ramen, or goodies from one of the fantastic halal eateries should warm your

bones. Fast, delicious breakfasts should help jump-start you when the mornings are darker. Taking in a game and a beer (or five) at one of our recommended sports' bars should keep your blood running hot — and speaking of blood, there's no better time to taste blood sausage than the traditional post-slaughter seasons of fall and winter. Need something to do when street fair season's over and it's too cold for Dolores Park? Take your friends to the warmth (literal and psychological) of one of the cooking classes we've tried out for you. And in our quickly cooling economy, our more-bang-for-your-buck prix fixe menus might warm your wallet. Now if only all this great food could do something about the insulation in my apartment ... **SFBG**

**Molly Freedenberg**  
FEAST 2008 editor  
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# 9 breakfasts to go

Going without breakfast can turn your brain into a fritzing light bulb that repeatedly buzzes: “Eat something ... zzz ... Eat something.” But who wants to take the time for a real meal when you can press snooze another 10 times? Which is why, when in a rush, many of us settle for microwavable crap made from pasteurized American cheese and unpronounceable chemical substrates, or maybe a pastry and giant cup of coffee that steadily converts the cerebral cortex into a vapid hummingbird.

But it doesn’t have to be like that.

For a hearty, quality alternative route to keeping your blood sugar up, try these handy local breakfast spots. They prepare eggs and bacon for a couple of bucks and a few minutes of your time. All these brekkies travel well in a messenger bag without leaking, and they are available all day. (Take note, fast-food restaurants. As it turns out, breakfast time comes between waking and going to work — not just before 11 a.m.). **(Sam Devine)**

## METRO CREPES

The fastest of the bunch is Metro Crepes in the Financial District. Inside the picturesque atrium of the Citigroup building, its little walk-up windows serve stuffed mini-pancakes in about the same time it takes to put cream and sugar in a cup of coffee. The Oakland Crepe, packed with egg, bacon, and cheese, is filling, yet light enough to avoid that big-breakfast food coma. And at \$2.95 it won’t cramp your finances, either.

1 Sansome, SF. (415) 217-7060  
www.metrocrepes.com

## BLUE DANUBE COFFEE HOUSE

The crispiest bacon in town might be on the open-faced breakfast bagel at the Blue Danube in the Richmond District. Crunchy slices sit on top of

tomato, egg, and cheddar that’s melted to perfection. The eggs are steamed, which keeps them from being too greasy and means that even when wrapped in a bulky box, the sandwich isn’t too sloppy to throw in a bag.

306 Clement, SF. (415) 221-9041

## HOUSE OF COFFEE

Although known for its many varieties of excellent java, the folks here should be famous for the delicious Irish breakfast roll — a fluffy sandwich roll accented with Irish sausage, bacon, cheese, and your choice of HP Sauce (a popular English and Irish condiment that tastes like bland A-1, and whose initials stand for “House of Parliament”) or ketchup. The \$5 sandwich doesn’t come with egg, but it can be added for 75 cents — and the sucker’s served all day.

1618 Noriega, SF. (415) 681-9363  
www.coffeesf.com

## COPPER KETTLE

You can also try a version of House of Coffee’s specialty, minus cheese, at this comfy eatery. These rolls don’t come with HP sauce either, but if you’re feeling worldly, you can add it yourself — there’s a bottle on each table of the homey restaurant.

2240 Taraval, SF. (415) 731-8818

## POSH BAGEL

This Sunset District outpost of the chain store may be the second-fastest breakfast game in town. Yes, eggs are microwaved and bacon’s precooked, but the resulting sandwiches are quick and tasty, if a tad oily.

742 Irving, SF. (415) 566-2761

## KATZ BAGELS

At Katz’s Lower Haight location, the egg-mit-bagel thing has been worked out to a science. Order tags with all the possible fixings wait for the hungry crowd, and cooks pump breakfast out like a well-greased pan. Their bagels are fluffy, chewy, fresh, and quick — plus, omelets are



METRO CREPES

GUARDIAN PHOTO BY ARLENE ROMANA

served in a matter of minutes. Try the wheat bagel, with its faint hint of cinnamon. I like these dedicated desayuno demigods who serve breakfast all day — but don’t forget Katz ends its day at 2 p.m.

663 Haight, SF. (415) 863-1382

## BOULANGE DE COLE

No matter where you live or work in the city, the Boulangeries are there for you. Born of a perfectionism that only the French can muster, this mini-chain is especially good for its delicious quiches. The chorizo quiche at Boulange De Cole wins the Goldilocks award for being not-too-spicy and not-too-bland, with sausage that’s not-too-oily, making it one clean, neat, tasty little egg pie.

1000 Cole, SF. (415) 242-2442  
www.baybread.com

## EL NORTEÑO TACO TRUCK

It’s a safe bet that half the police, thieves, judges, and trial lawyers in this city already know

about the taco truck across from the San Francisco courthouse. Try the hefty breakfast burrito with a choice of chorizo, bacon, ham, or potatoes any time of day: cashiers don’t bat an eye when one’s ordered at 2 p.m. They just start frying them eggs ’n’ bakey and get it out in about six minutes. And hey, if you’ve got to go up the river — don’t do it on an empty stomach.

Harriet and Bryant streets, SF.

## LULU PETITE

For those morning ferry commuters, stop by this little shop in the Ferry Building. Featuring some of the recipes from Lulu, its big sister on Folsom, the menu includes two fancy-pants baked egg sandwiches with fontina cheese and heirloom tomatoes. One comes with roasted peppers and scallions, the other with sausage. Since both are served on levain bread, you’re sure to remember the complex flavor of this sandwich no matter how quickly you eat it.

Ferry Building, SF. **SFBG**





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-7x7 Magazine 2008

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## DE AFGHANAN KABOB HOUSE



## 5 halal heavens

The Muslim world has just wrapped up another Ramadan, the sacred month of fasting and reflection during which it's said the Qu'ran was delivered to the Prophet Muhammed. What better time to explore some of the delicious Islamic-influenced restaurants of the Bay that feature halal food — literally, “permitted” by Islamic law? Let's get deliciously permissive!

Adherence to halal traditions is most manifest in certain types and slaughter of meat. Exact proscriptions vary, but here's the main gist: no pork, donkey meat, or carnivorous animals except for seafood and fish; blood must be completely drained before butchering; and all animals must be conscious when killed by a “person of the book” — Muslim, Christian, or Jew — while Allah's name is intoned. Halal fans, Muslim and non-Muslim alike,

swear by the tenderness and flavor of such meats — although that may have to do as much with cooking preparation as killing style. There's a wealth of restaurants here that serve some heavenly halal dishes, and since Islam covers a good chunk of the globe, there's a bounty of different cuisines to try. Most, but not all, halal spots will hang their certification in the window, and if you'd like to do the cooking yourself, halal meats are available at butcher shops such as **Salama Halal Meat** (604 Geary, SF. 415-474-0359), the goat-a-licious **Alhambra Meat Company** (3111 24th St., SF. 415-525-4499), or stunning variety store **Queen of Sheba** (1100 Sutter, SF. 415-567-4322). One halal holdback: alcohol is not usually served at these restaurants, so call ahead if you want some chardonnay with your tibs. **(Marke B.)**

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## BANG SAN THAI

A surprise to me: there are oodles of Islamic enclaves in Thailand, a mainly Buddhist nation. Bang San is a beyond-cute little kitchen-counterlike eatery in the Tenderloin which serves only halal meats in its spicy Thai favorites — especially good are the ginger beef pad king sod rice plate and the sweet red kang dang pumpkin curry kicked up with some jalapeño vinegar condiment. Bonus: satay to die for. The best part here, however, is the service — even though Bang San's operators had been fasting all day for Ramadan, they were out-of-control friendly and welcoming. 505 Jones, SF. (415) 440-2610 [www.bangsanthai.com](http://www.bangsanthai.com)

## TAJINE

Hunky Beau and I took our Swiss friend to this beloved Moroccan spot's new digs on Polk Street (the street for halal restos) because, really, the Swiss know from Moroccan food. The verdict? Authentically fab. Tajines are Africa's version of Asian clay-pot

dishes, stewlike in texture and cooked to piping-hot goodness. The tajine of white beans with merquez sausage was a hearty delight, with smoky undertones steaming up through the done-just-right legumes, which on different menus tend to smother any and all other flavors. Also an instant hit was the tajine guanemy — peel-off-the-bone lamb with artichoke hearts and peas, which delivered a spicy kick to match its neon green color.

1338 Polk, SF. (415) 440-1718  
[www.tajinerestaurant.com](http://www.tajinerestaurant.com)

## DE AFGHANAN KABOB HOUSE

Intent on grabbing a bite to eat before the dragzilla Trannyshack Kiss-Off party up the street, I had the great fortune to order at this wee Nob Hill joint just as the first out Olympic gold medalist, Matthew Mitcham, was making his historic winning dive on the big screen. Kismet? The food more than matched my exuberance: I can't imagine diving into a bigger Afghan taste bud celebration than

that which resulted from my first forkful of quabili pallow (buttery chunks of lamb baked with carrots, raisins, and basmati brown rice) and mantu (steamed dumplings bursting with savory seasoned beef, topped with a cloud-light split-pea yogurt sauce). One specialty you shouldn't miss: the bolani kadoo pumpkin turnover. Fall's perfect snack? Yes.

1303 Polk, SF. 415-345-9947

[www.deafghanan.net](http://www.deafghanan.net)

## OLD MANDARIN ISLAMIC

It's pretty much an open secret that the popular but not too popular Old Mandarin is one of the most unique chow spots in the city. Um, Islamic Chinese food? Let's go! It's easy to go ape wild for the tiny, lively Outer Sunset resto's specialties: hot pot, with a soup base, various spices and sauces, and a plateful of "animal parts" to cook yourself, and warm pot — hot pot's already-fully-assembled sibling. But for me the à la carte lamb dishes are the true stars, including super-spicy Mongolian lamb and delectably tangy cumin lamb. The

unbeatable lamb dumplings (a.k.a. pot stickers) benefit from a night in the refrigerator, so get some to go. 3132 Vicente, SF. (415) 564-3481

## HAYES AND KEBAB

This Hayes Valley newbie offers some sturdy Mediterranean favorites in a relaxed atmosphere, and is a lovely no-brainer for a not-too-dressy pre- or post-symphony bite. I'm a sucker for the chicken gyro served as a salad, with melt-in-your-mouth shredded chicken topping a robust mix of greens and veggies, dressed in a simple lemon-oil combo. The kebab plates are killer, too, with skewered lamb or beef delivered with a colorful side combo of rice and bulgar pilafs. "Alexander's favorite" is another yummer: Thin-sliced marinated lamb and beef with bread cubes in fresh tomato sauce and yogurt. I don't know who Alexander is, but I like him.

406 Hayes, SF. (415) 861-2977

[www.hayeskebab.com](http://www.hayeskebab.com) **SFBG**



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# 5 Jewish joints

It's easy to assume that the Jews of San Francisco have been culinarily deprived. Unlike New York and Los Angeles, San Francisco doesn't have an abundance of delis serving tongue-on-rye sandwiches or boiled bagels. But after tasting bowl after bowl of matzo ball soup at establishments across the Bay Area, I can assure Jews and Judeophiles alike that we aren't that bad off. Whether you crave a delicious and moist knish or that dessert of racial integration, the black-and-white cookie, you'll find what you're looking for at one of these go-to Jew food locales.

(Chloe Schildhouse)

## MOISHE'S PIPPIC

As soon as you enter this Chicago-themed deli, you become a part of the Moishe's Pippic family. Which means you'll be privy to matzo ball soup almost like Bubbe used to make. Moishe's variety, perhaps the best in the city, features seasoned dumplings floating in a perfectly salted broth with huge chunks of carrots. Also worth noting are sandwiches piled so high with whatever meat you want — including rare roast beef or, on Fridays, warm brisket with horseradish — that they might as well scream, "Eat! Eat! You're too thin!" They offer kosher hot dogs and sausages, too, but sadly, few desserts.

425-A Hayes, SF. (415) 431-2440

## HOUSE OF BAGELS

The quaint Geary Street eatery goes beyond lox on an onion bagel. Some of the flavors seem downright sacrilegious — chocolate? corn? whole wheat? — but all are delicious with regular or specialty cream-cheese spreads like honey or strawberry. Aside from bagels, the House offers a selection of deli sandwiches and various knishes wrapped in warm doughy crust. Best of all are the free mini challahs and dessert samples on the counter, ready for noshing

while you wait. The black-and-whites are the perfect cakey confection; and Jewish favorites like kugel, latkes, and hamantaschen round out the menu. But skip the matzo ball soup — the matzo balls fall apart and are as soupy as the unappetizing broth.

5030 Geary, SF. (415) 752-6000  
www.houseofbagels.com

## MILLER'S EAST COAST WEST DELICATESSEN

Bleu cheese and bacon on a burger? Oy! Miller's may not be the most kosher of delicatessens, but the meat-stacked sandwiches do a good job of adhering to the Jew-food tradition. Also, unlike the café Jack Nicholson visited in the *Seven Easy Pieces*, Miller's is flexible with its offerings: do you want cream cheese and lox on a slice of toasted challah? It may not be on the menu, but you can surely get this lovely combination. It's my usual — that, plus a cup of the matzo ball soup, which has a good consistency and lots of veggies (though the broth could use some salt and a bay leaf). Get a big bowl of soup with a half-chicken and make a meal out of it, or turn it into a feast by adding latkes accompanied by an applesauce that's like pie filling.

1725 Polk, SF. (415) 563-3542  
www.millersdelisf.com

## MAX'S OPERA CAFÉ

This place seems a bit confused about what kind of restaurant it is, with deli-style items, diner decor, and a laminated menu that gives off a Denny's vibe. But once inside, all that matters is the matzo ball soup, chock-full of vegetables, noodles, and generous cuts of lean chicken. Supplement it with traditional delights like corned beef, pastrami, or brisket with one of five mustard options, or try modern sandwiches like turkey with roasted pear and Brie. Another hearty option is the chicken



MILLER'S EAST COAST  
WEST DELICATESSEN

GUARDIAN PHOTO BY MATTHEW REAMER

potpie. Just beware: the servings are large and in charge. 601 Van Ness, SF. (415) 771-7300  
www.maxsworld.com

## TEL AVIV KOSHER MARKET

This is *the* place to be if you're in need of some tasty kosher treats. They stock all of the essentials and beyond — whether it be matzo meal, Passover desserts, challah, meats of all kinds, gefilte fish, turkey meatballs, wine, Israeli candy, or Bazooka bubble gum. The Jew-food fun never ends.

They also have a pre-made section hosting a scrumptious medley of carrots, eggplant, challah dogs, knishes, hummus, tahini, and falafel that you can enjoy on-site at one of their two tables. The challah is downright addictive and made locally. And delights imported from the Holy Land are just as good — and fun, like the dessert-in-a-box mix for chocolate balls dipped in sprinkles. (Follow the directions on the back, if you can read Hebrew.) 2495 Irving, SF (415) 661-7588 **SFBG**





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# 5 German delights

Contrary to popular belief, German cuisine is not an oxymoronic phrase. Though traditional food from the Fatherland does tend to be heavier on meat and carbs than the modern American diet, it — like Southern food, which has been getting more respect from foodies in recent years — is as capable of being nuanced, innovative, and highbrow as any of its more popular siblings (see: Spanish tapas, French everything.) For me, the secret to the perfect German restaurant is a place that balances tradition and modernity, in both cuisine and atmosphere. And then there's the spaetzle, the paisley-shaped egg pasta that's as ubiquitous a side dish in Germany as french fries are in America — and one that's hard to get right. Like gnocchi or risotto, the dish requires a certain attention to achieve its true potential. If the place does spaetzle well, you can assume it probably gets most other things right too. Guten appetit!

**(Molly Freedenberg)**

## SUPPENKÜCHE

Best. Spaetzle. Ever. Yes, this place won the prize for all-around best German food in the Bay, with its traditional menu expertly executed in an understatedly chic setting: white walls, beer hall-style tables, and a ceiling hung artistically with dried plants. The centerpiece is the bar, setting a casual, festive tone with plenty of beer choices. Everything I tried here was amazing, including a venison dish with cherry sauce. Potato pancakes were strange — more like hashbrowns than potato patties — but delicious. And the meal started with brown bread and chive butter, both excellent.

525 Laguna, SF. (415) 252-9289  
www.suppenkuche.com

## WALZWERK

This small, intimate East German eatery has a fine dining

feel and the cuisine to match — without giving up tradition. Roulade is made with high-quality meat and a pickle spear as its center. Red cabbage strikes the perfect balance between sweet and sour. And the sauerkraut I took home was so delicious — accented with caraway — that I finished it before it made it to the fridge. The only disappointment was its spaetzle, which was a bit overcooked. Wine and beer offerings are fantastic, and there are several decent veggie menu options. The best indicator of its worthiness? Both the servers and the people sitting behind me were actually from Germany.

381 S. Van Ness, SF. (415) 551-7181, www.walzwerk.com

## SCHNITZELHAUS

If there's an American stereotype of a German restaurant, this is it — except maybe smaller. The tiny, wood-paneled eatery has the feel of a mountain lodge and the hearty menu to match. Schnitzelhaus isn't trying to jump on the modern cuisine train — they're just doing German food with simple earnestness. This place gets extra points for its extensive menu of schnitzels (true to its name) — most places offer only two options, weiner (chicken or veal with lemon) or jaeger (pork with mushroom sauce) and its offerings of German wines. I was unimpressed with the spaetzle, which was thin, greasy, and not grilled enough. But the lentils are to die for.

294 Ninth St., SF. (415) 864-4038  
www.schnitzel-haus.net

## SCHROEDER'S CAFE

Left over from some kind of German American past (they've been around since 1893), Schroeder's is like a German restaurant set up in an Elks lodge. It's not trying to do the cutesy, kitschy thing: its decor is stark and no-frills. The food, too, is no nonsense — decent,



GUARDIAN PHOTO BY MATTHEW REAMER

but not entirely remarkable. The potato pancakes were too dense and greasy for my taste. The jagerschnitzel was overbreaded — though the mushroom sauce was delicious. The best thing about Schroeder's, though, was the spaetzle, which was fluffy, doughy, and not too oily. Perhaps better for drinking than dining, you might want to check this place out on Fridays in October, when there's live polka music.

240 Front, SF. (415) 421-4778  
www.schroederssf.com

## SPEISEKAMMER

This beautiful Alameda outpost is an ideal option for those in

the East Bay. The space is large, light, and sophisticated, including a beer garden illuminated by white lights and candles. Ideal for large celebrations and romantic dinners, this place features lots of beers on tap, a phenomenal wine list (by the glass and bottle), and a full bar, including a menu with several German-style cocktails (think fig vodka). The spaetzle and sauerkraut were both too greasy and the bread basket was unimpressive, but the atmosphere was perfect.

2425 Lincoln, Alameda  
(510) 522-1300

www.speisekammer.com **SFBG**





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# The *fixe* is in

## In praise of the set menu ... and where to find some good ones

By Paul Reidinger  
 › paulr@sfbg.com

In the horse race of American shibboleths, it's neck and neck between "choice" and "democracy" down the unending stretch. But maybe not in the kitchen. Well-settled folk wisdom teaches that the best kitchens more closely resemble autocracies or fiefs than serene republics. "A kitchen is not a democracy" — what sage said this, or should have? And out there in the dining room, it can be equally true that choice is sometimes more a burden than a benefit. Many of us have known the quiet horror of sitting down in a Chinese restaurant and being handed a menu whose numbered items run into the hundreds and whose heft is like that of an appropriations bill. Choice is not always for the faint of heart.

One of the reasons I retain a particular affection for Chez Panisse in Berkeley is its fixed

menu. It changes every night, but on any given night, they serve what they serve. The presentation of the menu card is something of a formality, a polite advisory. You are being clued in but not actually consulted. And, in a strange way, you relax, as if you're strapping yourself into an airline seat. You surrender your autonomy, say your little prayer, and trust in the fates to take you (and your luggage) where you want to go. And that's what happens. There's no point worrying, since it's out of your hands. You're free to direct your energies elsewhere.

As far as I know, Chez Panisse is the only restaurant in the Bay Area that uses this kind of absolutely set menu, the king of the prix-fixes. (And only downstairs. If it's choice you seek, upstairs you must go, to the excellent café.) But in recent years, I have noticed a gentle bloom of lesser prix-

fixes: some offered beside a regular à la carte menu, others that give a few options for each course. While quite a few of the restaurants are French, as we would expect, an increasing number aren't — so you won't necessarily get stuck with crème brûlée for dessert.

The prix-fixe isn't for everybody all the time, of course. There have been moments when I've forsaken a tempting one because I didn't want dessert (which is almost always one of the courses offered). At other times, a dish on the regular menu strongly appealed. Prix-fixe dishes have long seemed quite mainstream to me; they're the kind of things a kitchen can produce without too much struggle that appeals to a broad swath of customers. In return, you generally do get more for your money. The greatest prix-fixe deal I ever came across was at Hawthorne Lane, in the autumn of 2001: three courses for \$28 at one of the best restaurants in the city, where even the modest dishes were memorable. Those were strange days, true, and the restaurant itself is no more, having morphed into Two. But silently, with only my lips mov-

ing, I compare all subsequent prix-fixes to that one.

The George W. Bush *Wirtschaftswunder* has brought, among other delights, steady upward pressure on prices, especially food prices. Yet there is at least one restaurant in the city where you can get three courses for less than \$20 — only a nickel less, but still. The restaurant is **Le P'tit Laurent** (699 Chenery, SF. 415-334-3235, [www.leptitlaurent.com](http://www.leptitlaurent.com)), an atmospheric bistro in the heart of the Glen Park village. On nights when rain smears the windows, the street scene looks almost Parisian. Inside it's warm and cozy, with bustle. The prix-fixe is available until 7 p.m. and includes soup or salad, a main dish (perhaps sautéed prawns or roasted veal), and a dessert from the dessert menu, maybe the sublime profiteroles. My lone sorrow here is that if you want the restaurant's excellent cassoulet, you'll probably end up having to order it à la carte.

Only slightly more expensive, at \$23.50, is the three-course prix-fixe at **Zazie** (941 Cole, SF. 415-564-5332, [www.zazisf.com](http://www.zazisf.com)), another bistro that feels authentically French,





though more Provençal than Parisian. The prix-fixe possibilities here are marked on the menu card with asterisks; soup, salad, mussels, salmon, and chocolate pots de crème are some of the staples. Quite like France. A bonus draw is the restaurant's large rear garden, which is made habitable even on chilly winter nights by those heating trees you often see at ski lodges.

In a much more urban *quartier* we find **Le Charm** (315 Fifth St., SF. 415-546-6128, [www.lecharm.com](http://www.lecharm.com)), which since the mid-1990s has been an oasis of civilized clattering

in the scruffy heart of SoMa. The prix-fixe is a little pricier here — \$30 for three courses — but the cooking might also be a bit more urbane. Recent starter choices included salmon carpaccio and escargot, while among the desserts lurked a *financier* and a *sablé*. The restaurant also has a small patio for the al fresco-minded, and let's not forget that SoMa tends to be warmer and less windy than the city's more westerly neighborhoods.

Not all prix-fixes must be French. One of the better deals of the non-Gallic — indeed, of any — sort going

at the moment can be found at **Roy's** (575 Mission, SF. 415-777-0277, [www.roysrestaurant.com](http://www.roysrestaurant.com)), an outpost of the Hawaiian-fusion chain. The restaurant's three-course set menu changes seasonally and, at the moment, costs \$35 — making it something of a successor to the \$28 Hawthorne Lane bonanza. There is typically a choice among two or three starters and a like number of desserts, with a slightly greater variety (perhaps three or four possibilities) among main courses. The San Francisco version of Roy's doesn't much resemble its older siblings on the islands; those places are rustically elegant, while ours is unmistakably urban, with a lot of glass, hard surfaces, high ceilings, and gloss. But the food is excellent, and at \$35 for a full dinner in such a stylish setting, it's a bit of a steal.

**Firefly** (4288 24th St., SF. 415-821-7652, [www.fireflyrestaurant.com](http://www.fireflyrestaurant.com)), which turns 15 this fall, has been well worth seeking out all these years, prix-fixe or no. (The prix-fixe — \$35 for any starter, main course, and dessert — is a post-millennium wrinkle.) From the beginning, the restaurant has offered its wondrous shrimp-and-scallop potstickers while providing for the tastes of vegetarians and flesh eaters alike, with no apparent fuss. It's as good as a neighborhood restaurant could be, in a gastronomically-minded city where many of the best restaurants are in the neighborhoods. And with a prix-fixe option allowing a full range of motion across a supple and changeable bill of fare, it's also an enduringly good deal.

Far to the west, near the shores of the sea, we find **Pisces** (3414 Judah, SF. 415-564-2233, [www.piscessf.com](http://www.piscessf.com)), a seafood house with a minimalist look (including a bold black facade) New Yorkers would call "downtown." The

twist here is not one but two prix-fixes, one for \$23, the other for \$33. What does the extra \$10 buy you? A choice of desserts, for one thing; the \$23 folk must settle for, say, vanilla-bean crème brûlée. A little ordinary, but there are worse fates, surely; how often do bad crèmes brûlées turn up? The price premium also results in somewhat tonier savory dishes — Dungeness crab cake rather than clam chowder as a first course, for instance, or ahi rather than salmon as a main course. On the other hand, if you want cioppino, the famous seafood stew, you might end up spending less, since sometimes, even in America, less is more.

Lately one has heard a good deal of crashing and clatter coming not from restaurant kitchens but from Wall Street. The great leviathans of finance seem to be going down like torpedoed battleships, while the press struggles to decide if the nation is — pick your cliché — "drifting," "stumbling," or "sinking" into a recession. Whatever. Are we there yet? I would not be so bold as to suggest that prix-fixes are the answer to the many and large problems afoot in this land, but I do think prix-fixe menus are about value, and value is a value from which we stray at our peril. The last time the economic sky looked quite this ominous was seven years ago, after a terror attack and the popping of the dot-com bubble. We began to take a bit less for granted in that strange autumn, and people seemed to awaken for the first time in years to the understanding that champagne did not, in fact, flow from their taps. It made sense to spend more prudently, to look for deals. That was then and this is now, and suddenly now is looking a lot like then. While the high and mighty ponder their big fixes, the rest of us can once again enjoy our small ones. **SFBG**



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Continued on page 21



# 5 cooking classes

There's something perfect about a cooking class for an adult — it's a way to learn a new skill without making a huge commitment (Sure, I want to learn Italian — but who has time to spend a semester on it, only to know how to ask for directions?); it's a way to get closer to existing friends or to meet new people (especially singles-themed events); and it has a practical application (One must eat. One mustn't necessarily, say, do cross-stitch). So I've researched a selection of what the Bay Area has to offer, whether you're looking to strengthen partnerships, find new ones, or just change your relationship with your kitchen (it is, apparently, more than a place to keep your beer). The most important thing I've learned is that many classes offer similar tips, skills, and seasonal menus. And all intend to demystify or intensify your relationship with food. So when choosing a class, consider what it is you really want to get from it. Do you want to know how to make a gourmet meal for a dinner party? Do you want to meet new people and have a good time? Do you want to put some food in your freezer? Or do you just want to figure out what your gas range-top is good for other than lighting cigarettes when your Bic's out of fuel? Lucky for you, in a culinary-focused city like this one, there's a class for all of you. Here are some of my favorites. (**Molly Freedenberg**)

## THE CULINARY SALON

The only thing more charming than Chef Joe Wittenbrook is his teaching space: a quaint street-level apartment with a picture window in Duboce Triangle. Wittenbrook's focus is on the whole experience. This is not necessarily the class where you'll perfect techniques, but you'll learn more than you ever expected to — from the origin of the foods on your menu to special tips and tricks. His classes are small — a recent Saturday course had five students — and are therefore intimate and casual, made friendly

and warm by Wittenbrook's outgoing personality. Don't forget the wine — you're welcome to imbibe during class as well as the European family-style meal you'll share together afterward. Or, get four or six friends together and you can have him to yourself. 16-B Sanchez, SF. (415) 626-4379, [www.theculinarysalon.com](http://www.theculinarysalon.com)

## FIRST CLASS COOKING

The structure of these courses, hosted by Emily Dellas at her stunning SoMa loft, is similar to Wittenbrook's: everyone gets a list of recipes, takes turns preparing dishes, and shares the resulting meal together. As a food-lover without much formal training, though, her approach is to pass on her love for cooking to those who might be intimidated by it, demystifying dishes like profiteroles (the pastry base of cream puffs and éclairs). She likes to create menus that people can not only prepare themselves, but can feel good about eating on a regular basis — light, healthy, and seasonal. Her courses have room for about 10 people apiece, which means less hands-on time for each person, but the potential for a more festive atmosphere. Bring a friend and a bottle of wine. [www.firstclasscooking.com](http://www.firstclasscooking.com)

## PARTIES THAT COOK

Though Parties That Cook does host public classes (in particular, one for singles at Sur La Table), its specialty is creating cooking-themed events for corporate team building or private gatherings. And the experience it provides is part class, part catered meal. PTC will come to your house or help you rent a space, bring ingredients and cooking utensils, organize staff to help with hands-on instruction, and, when the meal is done, serve you and your guests restaurant-style. As an ideal option when you want to create a special event according to your tastes, PTC can accommodate up to 600 people. PTC even offers a recipe deck, complete



## THE CULINARY SALON

GUARDIAN PHOTO BY ARLENE ROMANA

with illustrated instructions on 30 different small dishes, that you can purchase as party favors. 601 Minnesota, SF. (415) 441-3595 [www.partiesthatcook.com](http://www.partiesthatcook.com)

## COOKS BOULEVARD

Though the independent kitchenware store hosts a variety of cooking classes, the cornerstone of its educational program is Essential Knife Skills, held monthly in the gorgeous, spacious teaching kitchen at the Katherine Michiels School. The concept of the course is to teach basic safety and techniques for wielding a cook's most important weapon, with each of up to 10 people getting to practice at their own station (and getting one-on-one attention). A bit more formal than the private cooking classes, the course is divided in half by a lovely cheese-and-cracker break. Although it's geared toward — and useful to — anyone, this seems like an ideal class for the intermediate cook who wants to develop the ability to cook more efficiently and beautifully. (Parents take note: the

company Apron Strings [415-550-7976, [www.apronstringssf.com](http://www.apronstringssf.com)] also hosts classes for kids at this lovely location.)

1335 Guerrero, SF. (415) 647-2665 [www.cooksboulevard.com](http://www.cooksboulevard.com)

## FOOD WIZ

Like Dellas, chef Marcus Gordon wants to teach that cooking should be fun and “anybody can do it.” The native New Yorker hosts small classes (limited to five people) in the remodeled kitchen of his Noe Valley home, offering hands-on experience, tips and tricks, a shared meal after the class (including a cocktail — but no drinking during class), and even food to take home. Most importantly, he wants his students to realize they can make better-than-restaurant cuisine at home and to enjoy his recipes of foods “that really jump around on your tongue.”

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**GUARDIAN**



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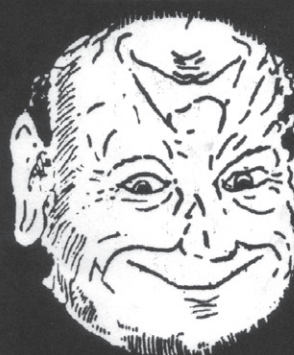
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B44



## 6 bloody sausages

Almost every culture has its own version of blood sausage. The delicacy is a traditional post-slaughter meal, made at the beginning of winter as a way of using the entire animal. It has many names: morcilla (Spain), blood pudding (English and Irish), blutwurst (Germany), boudin noir (France), and soondae (Korea), to name only a few. In most cases, the animal's blood is cooked until it thickens and then fillers are added, which usually are meat (usually pork), fat, suet, bread, potato, barley, or rice. Good blood sausage has a rich flavor, similar to *pâte*. Bad blood sausage has a metallic flavor, reminiscent of, ahem, blood. If you can't get past the name, call it gravy sausage (after all, that's exactly what it is). Don't let nomenclature prevent you from experiencing a city filled with bloody goodness; it's not just for vampires. **(Paula Connelly)**

### MORCILLA

Most of the ubiquitous restaurants in San Francisco serve morcilla. The Spanish version is usually made of onion, lard, salt, spices, and rice. (That's right, there's actually no meat in the sausage.)

Beginners can start at **Ramblas** (557 Valencia, SF. 415-565-0207, [www.rambla-stapas.com](http://www.rambla-stapas.com)), where sauteed morcilla comes crumbled, like a hash, with Italian butter beans and tomatoes (\$7.25). The rich morcilla flavor provides a unique undertone to the fresh beans and peas. **Picaro** (3120 16th St., SF. 415-431-4089, [www.picarotapasrestaurant.com](http://www.picarotapasrestaurant.com)) and **Esperanto** (3295 22nd St., SF. 415-282-8867) are sister tapas restaurants with matching menus and Miro-esque graffiti. Great for groups and walk-ins, and con-



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veniently located on two of the most bar-laden blocks in the Mission, their morcilla tapa is no-frills, hearty, and ready to share (\$7). Plus, if you ask nicely, you can substitute morcilla for one of the other meat choices on the combination platter. If you want to get out of the Mission, head to lovely Belcher Street in the Financial District, an alley laden with long strands of lights and patio dining. **B44** (44 Belden, SF. 415-986-6287, [www.B44sf.com](http://www.B44sf.com)) is a great place for a fancy blood sausage adventure with a Spanish wine complement. Try a Rioja Temperanillo to go with the onion-based morcilla, served whole with white beans.

#### BOUDIN NOIR

The French know how to make even the oddest foods taste delicious by successfully pairing ironic flavors. The Boudin Noir dish at **Cafe Bastille** (22 Belden, SF. 415-986-5673,

[www.cafebastille.com](http://www.cafebastille.com)) takes blood sausage to the next level, making a variety that's liver-based and is served on a pile of mashed potatoes and caramelized apples. It's like a high-class shepherd's pie.

#### BLOOD PUDDING

Taraval Street, easily accessible by the L train, is a haven for unpretentious diners and Irish pubs that serve blood pudding. (Important note: blood pudding does not resemble pudding.) A favorite is **New Taraval Cafe** (1054 Taraval, SF. 415-731-3816) doesn't look like much on the outside, but it serves up large portions of comfort food for a great price. The Irish breakfast comes with both black and white pudding (white is the bloodless, less tasty version of black pudding), two eggs, two pieces of Irish bacon, two Irish sausages, home fried potatoes, and toast (\$8.50). The blood pudding has a consistency like that of most breakfast sausage, but less dense.

#### BLUTWURST

Gather a group of your beer guzzling friends and head to **Suppenküche** (525 Laguna, SF. 415-252-9289, [www.suppenkuche.com](http://www.suppenkuche.com)) for blutwurst, more of a wurst than a sausage. Varieties come with the cold meat appetizer plate (actually a cutting board) and resemble light, soft salame. Order the Vesperplatte (\$13.50), which is served with German rye soda bread, mayonnaise, and a terrific sweet-and-spicy mustard.

#### SOONDAE (OR SUNDAE)

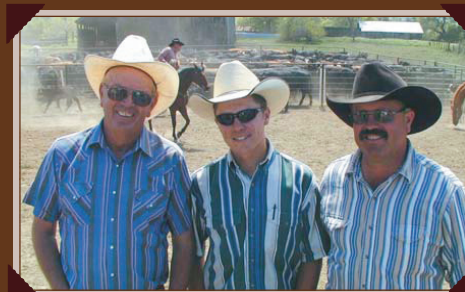
Korean soondae is a subtle, spicy, rice-based version of the delicacy, one that leaves a sausagey aftertaste. Try the pan-fried version with silver noodles at **Cocobang** (550 Taylor, SF. 415-292-5144), a surreal hole-in-the-wall that offers (also rice-based) Korean OB Lager, which makes its appearance in a giant, plastic, screw-top two-liter bottle. For a classier take on Korean BBQ, **Muguboka Restaurant** (401 Balboa, SF.

415-668-6007) has something for advanced lovers of blood sausage. Its sundae is big enough for four people and the menu provides a bare-bones definition of the dish. It's best with spicy noodles on the side.

#### KASZANKA

If you want a home-cooked blood sausage meal, head to Geary Street. Despite the shortage of Polish restaurants in the city, there are plenty of Polish delis. Check out **Seakor Polish Delicatessen and Sausage Factory** (5957 Geary, SF., 415-387-8660) or **New World Market** (5641 Geary, SF. 415-751-8810) and discover a whole new world of sausages, wursts, salamis, and, of course, kaszanka — Poland's take on blood sausage. **SFBG**

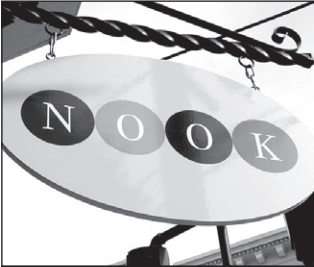
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TECHNICALLY IT WASN'T AGAINST THE LAW, SO UNTIL TOLD OTHERWISE FRANK WOULD CONTINUE TO DRESS UP AND VIDEOTAPE HIS FIRESTONE



GUARDIAN PHOTO BY MATTHEW REAMER

## 8 great game-day bars

As the nation kicks off another football season and gears up for baseball playoffs, San Franciscans may be wary of spending Saturday afternoons in ass-numbing bleachers or watching boozy out-of-towners roam the city in 49ers and Giants garb. But you don't have to rub up against the sweaty enthusiasts who paint their potbellies and holler like animals in the stands in order to enjoy a good game. Why not show your spirit in sports bars instead? I've spent weeks eating spicy wings, drinking pints of beer, and enduring painful hangovers to track down the best lounges and pubs for catching a buzz and cheering on your teams.

**(Meghan McCloskey)**

**GREENS SPORTS BAR**  
With 18 beers on tap and 25 high-def TVs, Greens was made

for big groups enduring hazy weekends of Niner mania. You'll know you're in the right place when you hear rowdy applause echoing from the pub's front patio throughout the otherwise quiet neighborhood. It's BYOF (but with all those drink specials, who needs food?) and gets super packed — in a good way — by game time.

2239 Polk, SF. (415) 775-4287

**GIORDANO BROS.**  
Native Pennsylvanians first opened Giordano Bros. to sell Pittsburgh's famous "all-in-one" sandwiches — complete with fries and slaw packed between scrumptious bread slices. They've since transformed it into Steelers Central. During games, bartenders are known to pass out bottles of original Pittsburgh

draft shipped from the source — and after big wins, they might even pour you a glass of bubbly on the house. (Sorry albies, no hard liquor.) An East Coast vibe resonates throughout the joint, from outdoor seating to endless memorabilia. The staff says the question isn't *if* you're from Pittsburgh, it's about what part of Pittsburgh you're from. Good thing I can fake an accent.

303 Columbus, SF. (415) 397-2767

### ACE'S

Ask any pigskin junkie where to watch last year's Super Bowl champs, and you'll get one answer: Ace's, where on Sundays the dive transforms into a funky buffet house chock-full of barbecued chicken, salad, and New York Giants fans. Add the extra-stiff \$5 Bloody Mary to the carte du jour, and you're headed straight for football-watching paradise.

998 Sutter, SF. (415) 673-0644  
www.acesbarsf.com

### ROYAL EXCHANGE

The good news: the Royal Exchange is loaded with finger-lickin' gorgonzola garlic fries (\$6.95), rows of cozy booths beneath a massive TV, a savory dinner menu, and Monday Night Football specials (Firestone Double Barrel Ale and Pale 31 pints for \$3.95). The bad news: it's not open on weekends. Big deal. Cal alums and students still party here on Friday nights to pump up for Saturday Golden Bears games. More good news: the staff accommodates private parties of up to 300 people. And the owners are Bears alums, too. 301 Sacramento, SF. (415) 956-1710  
www.royalexchange.com

### R BAR

With five plasmas devoted to University of Oregon games and bartenders who knock back shots with fellow Duck fans, it's no wonder regulars call this place the Oregon headquarters of San Francisco. Its full bar is dirt cheap; splurge for the two-dollar cans of Michelob during Saturday matchups or special events, which sometimes involve

the staff barbecuing brats and burgers outside for customers. I recommend wearing green and yellow, unless you want to brawl. 1176 Sutter, SF. (415) 567-7441

### MONAGHAN'S

You can watch a San Francisco Giants game in just about any well-respected sports bar in the city, but you can — and you should — watch the Chicago Cubs in only one spot: Monaghan's. For starters, it's got a new drink special every day of the week — \$3 for 20-ounce pints of *any* Irish beer on Wednesdays and \$2.50 Red Stripes on Fridays, to name two. Extra points for its daily happy hour: \$2.50 well drinks from 4-7 p.m.

3259 Pierce, SF. (415) 567-4466  
www.monaghanssf.com

### KEZAR PUB & RESTAURANT

Two words: chicken wings. They're damned spicy, but the zing doesn't linger uncomfortably on your lips or in your throat for hours afterward. Or maybe it does, and I just eat so fast and drink so much I don't notice. Either way, they're a perfect addition to a pitcher of Coors and a soccer game. For dinner, choose from fish and chips, barbecued sandwiches, and salads. Plasma televisions transmit all kinds of sports, from baseball to rugby, and the pool tables and large seating areas draw crowds you'll want to party with.

770 Stanyan, SF. (415) 386-9292

### MAD DOG IN THE FOG

This super mellow hole-in-the-Haight draws everyone from free-spirited bohos to scholars downing extra-large pitchers of Anchor Steam, Guinness, and almost every other kind of beer. You can't order food, but check out the killer German sausage joint across the street. Nosh on one at Mad Dog while watching European football and playing pop trivia on Tuesdays and Thursdays. This combo is right on the money.

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# 6 Seoul foods

Even among foodies, Korean cuisine does not get its due — and that's even more the case in San Francisco. As I searched for ways to get my kimchi on, I can't tell you how many people told me to look elsewhere. Some even said I had to go all the way down to Los Angeles if I wanted the good stuff. Well, naysayers, behold: these six eateries will help you put a little Seoul in your disbelieving bellies. (**G. Martinez Cabrera**)

## BROTHER'S

The Richmond is like the mecca of Korean food in this city, and Brothers is one of its better known eateries. Unlike some of the other Korean restaurants in SF, Brothers offers a no-frills environment. It's a bit like a diner seen through a Korean lens. Though the kalbi (barbecue short ribs) is quite popular, I would recommend the fried beef dumplings. If you dip them into the accompanying sauce (a combination of soy sauce, vinegar, and scallions), you won't go wrong.

4128 Geary, SF. (415) 387-7991

## NAMU

Not far from Brothers geographically, Namu is on the other side of the universe in terms of vibe. Its minimalist decor and predilection for playing Marvin Gaye and Teddy Pendergrass provides a little bit of hipness — and dare I say, sexiness — to an otherwise sleepy and seemingly sexless block on Balboa. Namu is billed as an Asian fusion place, but don't let that stop you. The bibimbap (a Korean stew made of veggies, rice, and egg served in a clay pot) is tasty and the ingredients are wonderfully fresh. (Local and organically grown veggies are used when possible.) And if that didn't sell you, try one of the desserts — the bean paste/chocolate cupcake gives new meaning to the word *goodness*.

439 Balboa, SF. (415) 386-8332

## KOREA HOUSE

If you want a more traditional Korean eating experience, complete with a variety of delicious banchan (the side dishes that traditionally accompany every Korean meal), then Korea House is a good place to start. Located in the heart of Japantown — for some reason, a number of nicer Korean restaurants are located there — Korea House has an old-school formality to it. It's the type of place where plush carpets encourage hushed voices, which is too bad because the bulgogi (barbecue beef) is so good that it'll make you want to holler. Please don't.

1640 Post, SF. (415) 563-1388

## JOHN'S SNACK AND DELI

Until about three years ago, if you were slogging away in the Financial District, you were out of luck when it came to Korean food. But then John came to the rescue. For less than ten bucks, he and his mom — who works right next to him at the counter — provide you Starbucks-loving folk with some pretty fine Korean fare. The menu is limited, but each dish comes with rice, a salad topped with a snappy ginger dressing, and a side of kimchi. And for those of you who just want to snack, there's kimbap (Korean-style vegetarian sushi roll) for around \$3. You go, John!

40 Battery, SF. (415) 434-4634

## COCOBANG

OK, so you're thinking, yeah, Korean sounds good, but I want a hangout, too. Well, brothers and sisters, I hear you — and the answer is Cocobang. With Korean music videos projected on the back wall, Cocobang is a great place to get both your Korean food and liquor needs satisfied. There are two-liter bottles of Korean beer at the ready, and soju (think vodka) chasers to be had. And because the official closing time is 2 a.m.,

## COCOBANG



GUARDIAN PHOTO BY ARLENE ROMANA

it's a good place to end your night. As for the food, the fire chicken came highly recommended, but being more a lover of the cow, I opted for kalbi, which had a marinade nothing short of awesome — it was like Memphis meets Seoul, it was as though ... I'll just say it: the guys at Cocobang are truly bringing the world closer together, one barbecue at a time.


550 Taylor, SF. (415) 292-5144

## SEOUL ON WHEELS

Last, and certainly not least, there's Seoul on Wheels. True to its name, this food truck combines two of my favorite things: the streets and the meats. Julia Yoon (the owner

and mastermind) doesn't stay in any one place too long, but you can find her route on her Web site. Once you do find her, though, you won't be disappointed. For six bucks — by far the cheapest Korean on my list — you get a meat dish with rice and japchae (a vegetable and noodle dish). You can opt for the kimchi fried rice, one of the best things I've ever tasted. The food is made fresh to order — when not driving, Julia and her assistant are cooking up the goods, which makes Seoul on Wheels truly a movable feast worth finding. **SFBG** Locations vary throughout SF [www.seoulonwheels.com](http://www.seoulonwheels.com)

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CAV



## 6 perfect cheese plates

There's an old wives' tale that eating cheese before bed will produce nightmares; but I've found that after nibbling a good Gruyère or a buttery Brie, my dreams are only about consuming more of that dairy delight. Whether you prefer yours drizzled with honey, spread on warm bread, or paired with a juicy red wine, the cheese plates at these six locations guarantee will feed your fromage fetish too.

(Dona Bridges)

### GARY DANKO

The Danko experience can be intimidating. Before going, one has to be physically and mentally prepared (palate sharp, Food Lover's Guide consulted at length), as well as financially stable (it's a go-to spot for birthdays and anniversaries,

usually ones ending in "5" and "0.") Those who prefer to get their feet wet first instead of cannonballing into the deep end might find the cheese plate a perfect starting point. It's worth a trip to the upscale eatery for the cheese plate alone, because, as with everything else here, it's both epic and elegant. There are 16 to 20 types of cheese to choose from, with seasonal variations but typically including picks from local farms in addition to harder-to-find selections. Options are wheeled around the restaurant on elegant silver carts, and the servers describe the flavor and origin of each one before cutting your cheese (yes, we did) while you watch.

800 North Point, SF. (415) 749-2060  
www.garydanko.com

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## BAR BAMBINO

This cozy restaurant on 16th Street mostly carries Italian cheeses, augmented by a few artisanal American varieties. The chalkboard menu changes seasonally, with offerings you won't find everywhere else. Not sure what you want? Sit at the bar or a small table and consult a cheese expert — soon adjectives will be flying like so many white handkerchiefs. When you get your order, the cheeses are arranged simply, accompanied with toasted brown bread, nuts, and fruit. Prices range from \$12–\$25 for three different sizes, making this place home to some of the more reasonably priced cheese plates we've found.

2931 16th St., SF. (415) 701-8466  
barbambino.com

## CAV

It is nigh impossible to ignore the cheese plates at wine bars, and Cav's is probably the best of the bunch, thanks to its extensive selection. The current menu lists

20 cheeses, divided into cow, goat, sheep, and blue cheeses — most from Europe but some from small American artisans. The menu contains helpful tasting notes on the cheeses, and the staff are definitely cheese sophisticates, so ask them about their favorites. At \$20–\$85 per plate, this is one of the more spendy places, but it's worthwhile for the substantial portions and the wonderful wine list. 1666 Market, SF. (415) 437-1770  
cavwinebar.com

## ABSINTHE

The cheese list at Absinthe may be concise — with about 10 European and three American varieties — but the plates stand out here because the cheeses are carefully chosen and thoughtfully paired. A French ash-rind goat's milk cheese, for example, gets a garnish of glossy pickled cherries; marinated olives accompany a Spanish triple crème; and housemade candied kumquats balance a dry, tangy American blue. A single

cheese with its pairing and toast points is \$8, or you can make three selections for \$22, or five for \$38. You can also surrender to the decadence of your surroundings and try all, with accoutrements, for \$99.

398 Hayes, SF. (415) 551-1590  
absinthe.com

## UVA ENOTECA

The formaggi at Uva Enoteca is formidable and comprises about a third of the nightly offerings. All the cheeses at Uva are Italian, and though the menu skips descriptions, well-informed servers are adept at describing the differences between a sheep's milk cheese from Tuscany and a cow's milk from Venice. The cheeses are served on a long wooden block, with various accompaniments ladled tableside, including a pear, apple, and black pepper compote, white truffle-scented honey, and sour cherry preserves. While elegant, Uva is decidedly unpretentious and surprisingly affordable: \$10 gets you generous portions of

three cheeses, \$16 gets you five, and for \$22 you can taste seven, which is almost half the menu. 568 Haight, SF. (415) 829-2024  
uvaenoteca.com

## COWGIRL CREAMERY

What's better than hitting the farmer's market, grabbing some cheese, fruit, and a baguette, and doing a cheese plate yourself? Nothing, we say. Nothing's better. The Cowgirl Creamery cheese shop at the Ferry Building is well known for its dizzying selection of cheeses from around the world, as well as for its own locally made, highly addictive varieties like Mt. Tam (a glorious, creamy cow's milk) and St. Pat (a sharp, delicious goat's milk with an herbed rind.) The cheesemongers at Cowgirl are unstumpable, and will let you try samples to your heart's content.

1 Ferry Building #17, SF  
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GUARDIAN PHOTO BY RORY McNAMARA

## Mapo tofu ramen: a love story

By Kimberly Chun  
✉ [kimberly@sfbg.com](mailto:kimberly@sfbg.com)

As cross-cultural Asian culinary collisions go, mapo tofu ramen is right up — or down — there with peanut butter-filled mochi, crab rangoon, and sweet and spicy teriyaki potato chips. Not for purity-obsessed traditionalist foodies, cholesterol watchers, or just plain unimaginative eaters, this delightful bastardization will float many a boat of the clean-plate brigade — if only they can find it. Mapo tofu ramen isn't sukiyaki, chicken teriyaki, shrimp tempura, or tekka maki — it's far from being a Japanese menu staple. But until wasabi noodles emerge to wipe spice lovers' sinuses clean, the few places that do serve this pepper-bedecked dish will be guaranteed pilgrim-

ages from heat-seizers who appreciate that pleasure 'n' pain combo of sneeze-inducing chilies and comfort-giving brothy benevolence.

Just a noseful of ramen swirling in soup sends me back to the jillions of noodle stands riddling train station platforms all over Japan. Their presence paralleled the ironclad reliability of the country's public transportation system. While you waited for your JR car, you plunked your yen in a quaint automat machine and pushed a button indicating your bowl of choice, be it udon or ramen, curry or karage. The machine issued you a ticket, which you forked over to the white-kerchiefed lady behind the teensy, tablet-shaped counter. Out came

your bowl, in a few Shinkansen-speedy minutes. As the wet, bone-deep chill of a Japanese winter whipped across the raised platform outside, past the shivering salarymen and shuddering office ladies, you inhaled the noodles, using the chopsticks as a slender shovel, and noisily slurped the bonito-laced soup — the greater the gusto and the more audible the consumption, the greater the appreciation. Stops at the noodle stand became a warmth-endowing ritual disguised as a quick, tasty snack.

So how did Japanese ramen — itself a much-loved, long-ago import from China — come to be paired with numbingly spicy, sinus-clearing mapo tofu? The dish brilliantly pits nutritious tofu — so revered that “eating bean curd” can mean “taking advantage of or flirting with a person” in Chinese, according to *Chinese Regional Cooking* — with ground pork, or occasionally beef, and mouth-numbing Sichuan peppercorn. I’ve found some of the finest examples of mapo tofu outside of Sichuan — ones that are a far cry from the brown-sauced, veggie-bedecked form it sometimes assumes stateside — in Japan, where heat-delivering comestibles like kimchi have also found favor. The premade mix you’ll find in most Japanese groceries is a decent approximation of the dish named, as legend has it, after a pock-mocked Sichuanese woman whose tofu swimming in meat sauce was worth traveling great distances to sample.

But who decided to first couple Sichuan-style spice with Japanese ramen? Online searches show mapo tofu ramen popping up on menus occasionally in Hawaii, Texas, and southern California. But my first brush with nose-clearing, sweat-beading heat came at **Genki (Healthy) Ramen** (3944 Geary, SF. 415-630-2948, [genki-ramen-sf.eat24hour.com](http://genki-ramen-sf.eat24hour.com)) in the Richmond District, under

streamlined, vaguely disco-like decor. Curtains of reflective spangles and modish thread-strung lamps hang above flat-screen TVs showing button-cute J-pop nymphets serenading CGI kittens. Right now it might be the only spot in Bay Area to get a bowl of the genuine article — in both the mapo tofu and ramen departments.

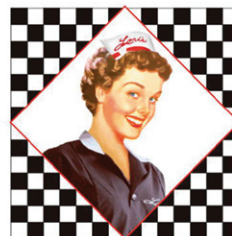
The bowl arrives with a side of daikon pickles, sweet enough to cut the heat. A delicate isle of red, white, and brown mapo tofu lies perched amid flecks of green onion atop an al dente mound of slithery ramen noodles. Concentric circles of chili-hued sauce, oil, and soup expand out from the small mound of tofu specked with small yet not negligible nubs of pork, like a fatty, psychedelia-savory fever dream. The sauce is ever so slightly sweet and oyster sauce-ish, and soup delivers a distinct, radiating kick of space. Later the waitress tells me the cooks simmer pork and garlic all day to make the tonkatsu broth. Spice-snorting bliss — a marriage of the bland, serviceable refinement of tofu and the oily goodness of pork. This is every vegan’s nightmare, though unlike bacon-wrapped tofu, one gone deliciously right.

I venture out in search of more, on the rumor that **Suzu Noodle House** (1825 Post, SF. 415-346-5083) in Japantown and **Katana-ya** (430 Geary, SF. 415-771-1280) near Union Square serve spicy tofu ramen that compares. But no such luck. Suzu aims to please with a fine broth and toothsome noodles, but the spice level lacks the red-faced power of Genki. And Katana-ya’s spicy tofu ramen is more of a kimchi tofu ramen, sporting bits of pickled cabbage. It can be considered the soupy counterpart to its kimchi fried rice.

And so it’s back to Genki we go: if some Sichuan chili fans are right, getting healthy should always involve such a delicious sweat. **SFBG**

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